



# Dining

WHAT'S NEW FOR YOU IN SOUTHERN MECKLENBURG

## New Yorker-seasoned barbecue

*Alex Ranucci moves south and perfects his pig-roasting skills*

How does an Italian guy from upstate N.Y. learn his way around a barbecue pit?

And, gasp, get so good at it that he wins awards for his prowess with pig?

Alex Ranucci of south Charlotte has always enjoyed grilling ribs and started experimenting with other parts of the pig after moving to Charlotte in 1998. He cooked for friends' tailgate parties and other get-togethers, and messed around in his kitchen, creating original sauces.

#### DINING OUT



Vanessa Willis

Ranucci, 34, started Big Butt BBQ two years ago and has been catering parties and corporate events ever since. He's

won several awards in competitions, including second place for pulled pork at the Charlotte Shout Blues, Brews & BBQ competition last fall.

"Sometimes people ask me how a Yankee like me could learn to cook the way I do," he says with a laugh. "I just shrug and tell them the secret's in my sauces and to taste for themselves."

He also sells bottles of his sauces occasionally at the Matthews Farmers' Market - Original, Lip Smackin', Kick Your Butt, Maple'Licious and Mustard.

He's hoping to do well enough with the catering business that he can quit his day job in medical sales someday. This weekend he'll be busy with a party at the Wachovia Championship.

Details: [www.bigbuttbq.com](http://www.bigbuttbq.com) or 704-516-7683.

(If you visit, you'll see his 1-year-old daughter, Mila Sophia, showing off her pig costume.)

#### The new Charlotte Cafe

**ARBORETUM** Walking into the new Charlotte Cafe, you'd never guess it used to be a '50s-themed diner that sold burgers and shakes and catered to young families.

The neon lights are gone, as is the jukebox that made the former Carolina Grill feel like an authentic soda shop. The newly renovated restaurant is bigger and has a classy muted decor with black wainscoting and a huge flat-pane

el TV.

Best of all, the Charlotte Cafe has an expanded menu.

I ordered the marinated grilled chicken over rice (\$8.95) with fried squash and macaroni and cheese. The chicken was juicy and wonderfully seasoned, making me glad that I had declined the brown gravy that comes with it. The white rice was sticky and overcooked, so I pushed it aside and enjoyed the other sides.

My husband devoured his vegetable plate (\$5.95) with corn, green beans, fried okra and mashed potatoes.

The only part of our experience that was disappointing was being charged \$2.50 for our toddler son's milk and having that repeated for a refill. Five dollars for two cups of milk? Outrageous. That policy must be revisited if they hope to make the restaurant family-friendly.

They also charge 50 cents for to-go cups, which is ridiculous.

Owner Jimmy Roupas of Charlotte decided to reopen the Carolina Grill as a Charlotte Cafe when the Subway shop next door closed, leaving extra space available. The Arboretum location is modeled after his original Charlotte Cafe at Park Road Shopping Center. Both cafes serve three meals Mondays through Saturdays. Info: 704-542-9006.

#### Savory Shuttle grows

Savory Shuttle has expanded service to deliver foods from several southern Mecklenburg restaurants.

The delivery service charges \$5.99 per restaurant, and you must order at least \$10 in food from each location you send them to. You can place orders by phone or online.

For a list of restaurants, visit [www.savoryshuttle.com](http://www.savoryshuttle.com) or call 704-927-4444.

#### Dinner with 'Cigar Dave'

**BALLANTYNE** If you enjoy a good stogie, head to the Ballantyne Resort's Gallery Restaurant on May 28 for a dinner hosted by "Cigar Dave."

Dinner begins at 6:30 p.m. with cocktails "under the stars."

Reservations: 704-248-4100. Details: [www.gallery-restaurant.com](http://www.gallery-restaurant.com).

#### SHARE YOUR GOODIES

Send ideas for Dining Out to Vanessa Willis, [vwillis@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:vwillis@charlotteobserver.com) or call 704-358-6009.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALEX RANUCCI

Alex Ranucci experimented with barbecue when he moved to Charlotte from New York in 1998. Big Butt BBQ, a catering business that opened two years ago, has won several awards.



The Ranucci family celebrates winning second place for pulled pork at the Charlotte Shout Blues, Brews & BBQ competition last fall. From left are Zoe Ranucci with baby Mila Sophia; her husband, Alex; and his parents, Ed and Cathy Ranucci.

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